Dire climate report offers few solutions

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Body

NEW YORK - A landmark U.S. climate change study by 13 federal agencies brings greater urgency to the question of what Americans can do to avoid an unprecedented shift in how they live in coming decades. What it doesn't do is provide any answers.

"The report does not make policy recommendations, but it is abundantly clear that there are strong policy implications," said Andrew Light, a co-author and a senior fellow at the World Resources Institute. "Every single one of them is, unfortunately, not something that the U.S. is pursuing at the national level."

The National Climate Assessment catalogs the environmental and projected financial damage from a climate that's broken free from 12,000 years of relative stability. It looks forward to 2090, when even in a lower-carbon projection the added cost to American society will be more than $100 billion in 2015 dollars, and maybe as much as $200 billion - annually. And that's a best case scenario.

Unstated in the report is that the U.S. government, like most around the globe, isn't doing enough to slow a planetary march toward the cliff's edge. The Trump administration has dismissed without evidence the scientific consensus that humans are responsible for global warming, and moved instead to roll back existing initiatives to slow pollution - to the benefit of fossil fuel interests.

Widely accused of trying to bury the NCA report by releasing it on Black Friday, a traditionally busy day for Americans focused on family gatherings and shopping, the White House has since sought to downplay the congressionally mandated report.

In recent years, thousands of Americans have died during, or as a consequence of, extreme weather tied to climate change - from powerful hurricanes fueled by extremely warm seas to calamitous conflagrations stemming in part from drought. Evidence assembled by climate scientists suggests that such phenomena will get worse as the global temperature continues to rise.

The NCA addressed the practical effects of climate change on everyday Americans. It assessed a range of rising prices, from household expenses to the availability and pricing of food, energy and other goods. Additional emphasis was placed on how U.S. reliance on other nations will cause it to suffer their climate consequences as well.

"The impacts of climate change, variability, and extreme events outside the U.S. are affecting and are virtually certain to increasingly affect U.S. trade and economy - including import and export prices and businesses with overseas operations and supply chains," the authors write.

When it comes to offering solutions, however, the report is silent. The authors describe the benefits of avoiding worst-case scenarios, called mitigation, without suggesting which specific policies would achieve them. They

suggest technological and behavioral changes that lead to significantly lower emissions can cut potential financial damage by half, but fail to offer up one as the best course of action. Unfortunately, it was outside the NCA's remit to specify policies to pursue, or which existing, or yet-to-exist technologies, could work in time.

Ominously, even if a better scenario were to occur by 2090, it would still leave Americans in a country where the government, and thus taxpayers, pay hundreds of billions of dollars more annually to address the fallout of accelerating climate change.

A scenario with dramatically less pollution could slash projected losses by 48 percent ($75 billion) a year in labor costs, 58 percent ($80 billion) in heat-related deaths and 22 percent ($25 billion) in coastal real estate, according to the report. But that still leaves a 12-figure taxpayer burden every year. As far as money to build such solutions is concerned, current-day America faces a $21 trillion national debt fueled by corporate tax cuts, rising healthcare costs, defense spending and Social Security.

But Andrew Light of WRI said many options to address climate change already exist, and that spending on such technologies should be seen as an investment that will be recouped. The opportunities are real and there's money to be made, he said.

"The old days ... when acting on climate change was all pain and no gain - are done," Light said.

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